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MORNING IN AMERICA

We opened the doors of St. Joseph's Emergency Winter Shelter for Women and Children on a drizzly, dreary Saturday evening in January. Walking from the BART station to the shelter, I stumbled over the sad remains of New Years Eve celebrations, the streamers and confetti begging for a better year in 1986. By the time I arrived for my first night on the job, there was a line of women waiting impatiently. The first family in line was a hefty black woman and her two daughters anticipating a hot meal, beds, and protection from the rain.

Sandra pushed her way inside out of the cold with confident obliviousness to the others. Close behind followed her two daughters in their late teens, one carrying a baby. There is only one way to say it – Sandra was large and loud. It was impossible to ignore her presence or to mistake her voice. She lumbered into the shelter and filled the place in every way imaginable.

The younger daughter, Dahlia, was a formidable presence and exact image of her mother. Damaris was the polar opposite of her mother and sister in both size and aura. Damaris' newborn daughter, Jailah, was two months old and she weighed a scant seven pounds.

That evening and each of the following evenings, Sandra and Dahlia would sign in and then dump their "goods" on their cots. They joked loudly and displayed their wares proudly. They were the first in line for food and

the last to go bed. They didn't just live at the shelter, they filled and dominated it. Damaris spent her evenings in the corner rocking Jailah in a hickory rocker that a St. Joseph parishioner had donated especially for her.

Something about my name struck Dahlia funny. "What got into your mama to name you Hope?" she would ask. In turn, I would comment about being named for a flower. She'd snort back at me, "A flower is better than hope. Who has hope?" Many evenings she would follow me around the shelter murmuring my name over and over. "Hope, Hope, Hope, Hope," she would repeat and when I asked her to stop she found that even funnier than my name.

When not with her mother and sister, Damaris talked quietly about finishing high school, perhaps going to college. She was interested in strange facts in history and she liked reading. She had just finished *The Color Purple*, and she told me how much she loved *Anne of Green Gables* when she was younger. "Did you know," Damaris asked me one night, "that Hitler's mother wanted an abortion and her doctor talked her out of it? Just think how different things might have been if she had done what she wanted?"

Damaris even thought about writing some stories herself, but she didn't want to use the notebooks that her mother and Dahlia stole from the drugstore. Humiliated by the antics of her family, Damaris had little energy or knowledge of how to break the ties and move out on her own. Her family was all she had, but now with a baby daughter she was just beginning to look at things in a new light. Jailah renewed her dream that she might do something different with her life.

In the two years that I worked at St. Joe's, I saw Sandra and Dahlia several times, but I never saw Damaris again. They shrugged disinterestedly when I asked about Damaris. The last time they came, Sandra responded to my question with, "Damaris who?"

If ever there was a woman who fit the image of President Reagan's "welfare queen," it was Sandra. Dahlia was only a decade or two behind her mother in both experience and effort. Neither one drove the requisite Cadillac or had an income of \$150,000. Those eyebrow-raising details were Reagan's embellishment. From his first

mention of the welfare queen in the 1976 primary race, Reagan clung to his story, reviving it with renewed fervor during his presidency. The image struck a nerve in the post-civil rights, middle-class, white America, and the icon fixed itself in the collective imagination.

Welfare and welfare fraud had long been viewed as a minority issue; with Reagan's words, the target became both race- and gender-specific. The media could not locate and verify this black woman on welfare with numerous wigs, a myriad of identities, too many children, and a Cadillac. Even so, Reagan's anecdote had a panache that grated it a long and illustrious life.

Many Americans came to despise this mythical person who could live so high while ignoring *our* values and *our* work ethic. With public support, welfare was cut and housing assistance reduced. Reagan appointed developers and bankers to sit on the national task force on housing. In the preceding decades, there was an increasing de-institutionalization of the mentally ill. With many causes, homelessness was on the rise in the 1980s. On *Good Morning America*, Reagan told us that the homeless were homeless by choice. Places like St. Joe's were springing up everywhere in a feeble effort to get people off the streets.

Sandra and Dahlia left a wake of debris in their path across the East Bay. They didn't have a six-figure income, but they had a Santa-Claus sized garbage bag filled with high-end clothes, shoes, cans of tuna, purses, calculators, Tylenol, and much more. En masse, the neighborhood around St. Joseph's shelter descended on the parish office to register its anger and intolerance. Within a day of our opening and the arrival of Sandra, the grocery store, drug store and the public library reported on Sandra and Dahlia's swath of shoplifting and general mayhem. St. Joe's ongoing existence was at risk. We immediately implemented a new rule. Anything that a client brought into the shelter must have an accompanying receipt.

Sandra was one of the long-term homeless, a woman who had figured out how to work a system that had screwed her. With her blatant disregard of society's values and her rough manner, her very presence proved and disproved points on all sides of the issue. Sandra led my first class in Homelessness 101.

When I accepted this job offer to work at a shelter for homeless women and children in the East Bay near

Oakland, California, I had no idea what was to come. My life in the Bay Area was chaotic and exciting in ways I had never known before. In addition to the shelter job (which would provide more excitement than I really desired) my cousin Jill and I, along with two other friends, lived in a cheap apartment near Lake Merritt with a certifiably crazy landlady who had just gotten out of prison for burning down another one of her apartment buildings. During the day, my friends and I battled our Psycho-Landlady; at night, I struggled through the drama and trauma of one of the San Francisco Bay homeless shelters.

Jill and I had moved to Oakland from Iowa in our post-college aimless wanderings. Armed with high ideals, a relatively compassionate heart (or so I thought having grown up with a religious community that valued service and compassion as a woman's rightful goals in life), and (most importantly) a need for a job, I began to work in what turned out to be one of my most difficult jobs of my life. My high ideals were quickly tempered by this new experience. Working at a shelter messed with my mind, my self-perception and my world view. I quickly learned that people didn't always like me despite my best efforts. I had to be much more aggressive than I wanted to be. I discovered that compassion is seldom sufficient for such a job and that dreams of justice cannot always be realized. Working at the shelter even turned me into a temporary smoker.

Becoming an intake counselor in a homeless shelter wasn't exactly what I had planned for my life. It was true that in the distant past of my high school days I had said that I wanted to be a social worker, but I had long since abandoned that goal. It took a while to acknowledge that I really did not want to "work with people," as I had blithely stated to my high school guidance counselor. Despite the counselor's assurances to the contrary, my choices didn't appear to be infinite. While opportunities for a college education were slowly emerging in my Conservative Mennonite community, the most easily justified course of study was in a service profession. It was acceptable to think about becoming a nurse, a teacher, or a social worker. Not one of those careers appealed to me. I had agonized over this decision for a number of years before enrolling at the University of Iowa to study history.

It did not take long to discover that an undergraduate degree in history provided little in the way of great job prospects. As a result, I worked at a series of low-paying, unfulfilling jobs: home health care aide, typing

scientific reports for a translator, retail research for a marketing firm. All the while, I kept looking for something better, something that gave me more than a paycheck. I wanted meaning and purpose.

This was the decade that President Reagan had declared to be “Morning in America.” It began with double-digit inflation and would end with the fall of the Berlin Wall. In between it included a war on drugs, the emergence of crack babies, and the Year of the Yuppie. It spawned aid concerts such as Live Aid and Farm Aid, which brought out celebrities to urge us to sing “We are the World.” We repeated disparate slogans from “Where’s the Beef?” to “Just Say No,” to “Shop ‘till you Drop.” Depending upon our world view or place in life, our bumper stickers read “Baby on Board,” “Save Mono Lake,” “The Moral Majority is Neither,” or “No Contra Aid.” The decade brought us Donald Trump, Ivan Boesky, Oliver North, and Leona Helmsley.

But during this decade we also had Mitch Snyder and Carol Fennelly to admire. I had been reading about Mitch and his work for the homeless in Washington, D.C. when a friend at Catholic Social Services called to tell me they were opening a temporary shelter for homeless women and children in a nearby city. I applied and, to my surprise, got the job with no experience or understanding of what this would entail. That was how I found myself working the overnight shift at a temporary shelter for little pay and too much drama.

My lack of experience and my idealism was, in retrospect, a hidden blessing. I might have run the other way if I’d have known. In any case, that was how I came to work with a Catholic parish providing shelter for homeless women and their children. What I found when I walked into that shelter each night was “Morning in America” on the ground. Here I met Sandra, the welfare queen, and all the others who were desperately seeking shelter amid crumbling lives and a struggling economy.

She walked through the door, down the hall, toward the kitchen-turned-office where I awaited our clients each evening. Her long, tangled, black hair framed a leathery, brown face, but how much was dirt and what was merely skin toughened by life in the open air, was anyone’s best guess. Eyes darting from side to side, she surveyed the hallway, the people who were milling around waiting for dinner, and finally -- me. Involuntarily, I almost took a step backwards. The look she projected was concentrated, forceful, almost feral.

Looking into her filmy eyes and filthy face, I swallowed my uneasiness and began the intake process. Her name was Linda, but beyond that I could get very little information. It was difficult to the point of impossible to assess Linda's needs and provide referrals. The intake interview was often a game of reading between the lines and deciphering body language or state of the eyes; with Linda it was an absolute guessing game. Her race/ethnicity, reasons for being homeless, SSI/income information – all of it was a lost cause.

Even in my inexperience and naiveté I knew that I might be risking a lot (even my job) if I allowed her to stay for the night, but I couldn't tell her to leave either. As a temporary shelter, we had no bathing facilities. I gave her a washcloth and towel and showed her the bathroom.

All evening, Linda sat in the hallway rocking back and forth on a creaking folding chair, muttering indecipherably. The other residents kept their distance. Linda's words, when I could catch them, were random and intriguing and bizarre, but lacked any context or meaning.

"... *mumble, mumble* ... alabaster ... *m-mumble, mumble* ... murky ... *m-m-m-m-m* ... never ever ... *mumble* ... cake ... running."

Her muttering continued nonstop, but conversation was impossible. Her eyes rarely met mine and when they did, her gaze revealed no indication that she saw me. I could have been gazing into the eyes of a rainbow trout for all the response and recognition that I was garnering. Linda paced the hallway, would seldom lie down, rarely sat on the edge of her cot. I explained to her the rules about lights out and quiet times; she never acknowledged my words and continued to murmur throughout the night.

In one way, Linda inspired less fear than most. A mother with several children could look like any of us. Linda could not. Linda just looked – crazy. The desire not to be near her was not fear, but revulsion. No one wanted her near them. Even the children, normally relatively uninhibited, avoided contact with Linda. But despite the revulsion that she inspired, Linda didn't make anyone feel that this could be them. Linda sat alone and that was how she seemed to want it to remain. Shelter activity swirled around her with its normal chaos. She never noticed.

Several days later, Linda solved the problem of what to do with her in the shelter. She simply evicted

herself and left as quickly as she had arrived, without referrals for mental health care, without assistance in obtaining other shelter.

At 10:30 on her last evening, she came to my desk and stood staring. Only she wasn't glaring at me. She was glowering at her image in the mirror behind me. "You," she thundered, "you have been v-e-e-r-r-y bad." She stomped her foot to emphasize the point. "You cannot live with civilized people. There are good people here and small children too."

Her brief, choppy speech was as much coherence as I had ever heard from her, the first time she actually seemed to see me. The next thing I knew, she fixed her crooked grin on me, swiped her hair behind her ear and took hold of her left sleeve with her right hand saying, "Would you like me to remove her for you?" Without waiting for an answer, she escorted herself down the hall and out the back door. She left behind a crumpled napkin on the desk for me, a napkin with a drawing of a wild-haired woman sitting at a desk with a straight-laced figure that was (obviously) me.

One Sunday morning a month later when I got off work, my friend Doug and I walked up Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley on our way to Café Mediterranean. We carried our *Oakland Tribune* and bought a *San Francisco Chronicle*. Sipping our coffee, awaiting pancakes and French toast, and soaking up the early spring sunshine, we handed the various sections of the newspaper back and forth. When I finally reached the arts and leisure section, I stared in disbelief. There in the bottom right corner were two paintings of a sad looking woman who could have hailed from Picasso's blue period.

A brief article described a homeless woman whose oil paintings were sweeping the art scene of San Francisco. The article identified this particular artist, recognizable by her self-portrait, as Rose Linda. The dreamy, surreal quality of the painting could not hide the artist's identity. It was Linda-from-the-shelter, the woman who had evicted herself. The words of the article were almost as unbelievable and incoherent as Linda's own words that she muttered in the darkened halls of St. Joe's.

Over the years I have searched for her name and her work, but she has disappeared. Perhaps there is a painting hanging in a gallery somewhere, but if so, I have not found it. She was, perhaps, merely a brief trend, the

attention paid to her one way to soothe some consciences in a growing disparity of wealth. Not even Google, our twenty-first century, find-everything-tool has led me to further information. Rose Linda has vanished and all I have is a newspaper clipping with which to remember her.

My supervisor and co-workers were every bit as interesting as our clients. There were not many of us; David was the parish deacon, the one who directed the shelter from afar, worked with the financial end of the endeavor. He popped in from time to time to see how things were going. His underlying kindness offset his brusque manner and intolerance for any deviation from his version of "The Right Path."

Aaron was the hands-on director who had been helping launch shelters for at least a decade, even though he was just into his 30s. A descendent of Hawaiian royalty, he taught us phrases in Hawaiian, played his ukulele for the children, and watched out for the staff as well as for the clients. When I had a cyst removed from the top of my head, his eagle-eyes noticed immediately and he asked me numerous times how I got those stitches. He was as vigilant in his efforts to determine the believability of *my* story as he was with any of the clients. He had adapted to the milieu of shelter life such that he saw everyone as a potential victim of abuse.

Besides myself, there were two other intake counselors: Leah and Sharon. Leah had spent the previous several years running from her own batterer. With an MSW and her experience as a battered woman, she was the most knowledgeable – and also the most volatile – of the staff. She was edgy, irritable and ever-vigilant for the appearance of her former husband. This was the man who had followed her from one side of the United States to the other, forcing her and her teenage daughter into a nomadic life. The Bay Area was their fifth location since leaving him. Leah took her nervous alertness out on the other intake counselors. In retrospect, it is easy to recognize PTSD, but the terminology was less than a decade old at the time.

Sharon was an activist working on two key peace and justice causes: advocating for homeless women and protesting nuclear testing. She spent much of her off-time sitting at the gate to the Nevada test site. As long as she was on staff, I was safe from Leah because Sharon was the butt of Leah's anger and hatred. After Leah forced Sharon to leave, she unleashed her anger on me. I was an easy target, an idealistic and naïve Midwestern

transplant who (I'll be the first to admit) made lots of errors in judgment. Why she had not chosen me first, over Sharon, is still a mystery. Perhaps she thought I would be more malleable, more open to her efforts to teach and mold.

Our shelter was not specifically for battered women, but over time we saw many who were homeless because they were fleeing an abuser. Shelters for victims of domestic violence were a relatively recent phenomenon and they were underfunded in the face of a growing demand. Leah, of course, recognized abuse the most readily of the three of us. On more than one occasion, we admitted a battered woman who could not find an opening at a hidden shelter. We accepted each one with fear and trepidation. Only once did the batterer also come to the door in search for his victim, but the likelihood was an ever-present fear.

There was so much to learn at the shelter and so little preparation. On-the-job training was good only in that it provided real life examples of textbook knowledge. The constant flow of people required many split-second decisions: who should be admitted or refused admittance, who should be evicted, or when to call Child Protective Services. At first it wasn't easy to differentiate between a behavior that was a drug reaction and one that indicated mental illness. Then, too, there was always a third possibility, that the behavior was street-induced idiosyncrasy emanating from the stress of raising children without a roof or daily food. With almost every decision that I made, I harbored the belief that I was making the wrong move. In that one assumption, I was usually right.

When Patricia arrived with her five quiet, delightful and obedient daughters, I was drawn to her resolute nature and her desire to make a life for her girls even in the shelter chaos. She tended them lovingly and spoke as if she had some education. She had been a legal assistant for a lawyer, but lost her job when he had been indicted for non-payment of taxes. Before she could locate another job, she was evicted from her apartment and the six of them were out on the streets. The daughters ranged in age from 4 to 15 and they all watched out for each other while they kept up with their homework. There was no fighting among this bunch, no back talk to their mother.

Every resident had four weeks to stay at the shelter and if at that time they were "on track" by shelter standards we granted them an additional two weeks. During their residency they received the appropriate

referrals and free bus passes to get to appointments. Patricia appeared to be the “most likely to succeed”, the first one who would be able to get back on her feet and out of the cycle of poverty and homelessness. She dutifully went to every appointment to keep up her AFDC payments, worked on her resume, and came home to the shelter to encourage her daughters that they would have a home again soon. They followed the rules and kept their bedroom area neat and tidy. She was the antithesis of the Reagan Welfare Queen; her daughters did not fit the identity of poorly behaving, underachieving kids on the street.

One evening the five daughters led by Keisha, the 15 year old, filed in the door and to my desk to sign in for the night. I assumed that Patricia was just a few steps behind them. Fifteen minutes later, it occurred to me that I had not yet seen her and I went in search of Keisha to ask where her mother was.

“I don’t know,” Keisha answered my query. “I haven’t seen mama all day. She was going to the drugstore for some Nyquil for Baby Girl and she didn’t come back to the park where we were waiting.”

My questions elicited nothing more from the girls. They watched Keisha and let her do all the talking. Not one of the five acted like this was out of the ordinary nor appeared to be frightened, but I didn’t catch that salient fact until later. The shelter rule was that no child was to be admitted without their mother, but these were Patricia’s girls. I couldn’t send Patricia’s girls into the cold, not even if it meant the warm car of a CPS worker. Surely Patricia would be here soon.

But Patricia didn’t come. Throughout the night I considered the options, but remained worried and perplexed, certain only that Patricia would be back for her girls and that all would be well. There would be a reasonable explanation. The wait was agonizing. It was nearly morning before I received a phone call from the police stating that Patricia was in the hospital. Someone had found her tied in a tree in a park in the Oakland hills. She was dehydrated, badly bruised, and had multiple serious lacerations. They told me that someone would bring her to the shelter the following evening. That was all the information they could provide.

In the morning I handed the girls their daily bus passes along with an extra hug. Tonight they would be back together in the shelter, back on the road toward self-sufficiency – the one that led to a job and an apartment. I was far too distressed and worried to go home and sleep for the morning. Instead, I got off BART at Lake Merritt

and wandered around the gardens on the roof of the Oakland Museum.

When I got to the shelter that night, Aaron and Leah were both there. Leah's pursed lips indicated trouble. "What the hell were you thinking by not calling CPS last night to get Patricia's daughters?" she demanded. Aaron's approach was kinder. "Do you understand what happened?" he asked me. He sent Leah off to finish the evening intakes that would have been mine to do. He explained that it was not a random act of violence that left Patricia tied to a tree in a park. She often left her daughters to go off with strange men – this time with two strange men. What began as a mutual tryst ended in serious assault.

So what did I know? I had no training and I had lived a life where what you saw was, for the most part, what was true. In the shelter, "truth" took on a whole new dimension. Truth was survival and survival might require distortions of truth and alterations of fact. I never got used to the constant need to separate fact from fiction. Sometimes it didn't matter; more often it did. There was always, or so it seemed to me, such a fine line between truth and fabrication. And I wanted to believe people, in their innate goodness and worth.

Nights spent worrying over what this drug addict would do, or whether that mother was abusing her kid, moments of frustration over who had stolen the bus passes helped eliminate some of my naiveté. When 3-year-old Jasmine came to the shelter with a clear hand imprint on her face, it was easy enough to determine the course of action, no matter what her mother reported. But when someone's children were running amok through the shelter, while the attempts of their mother (which seemed like honest efforts to me) brought no positive changes in behavior it was difficult to determine whether she just needed a referral to parenting classes or if this was the point of eviction. And the shadow hanging over all my decisions was the knowledge that as a childless woman with a place to call home, how could I possibly understand the travails of child-rearing without the benefit of four comforting walls and three square meals a day? As for Patricia, I still find it hard to accept that she brought this on herself.

In the bigger picture, however, I was not attempting to build long-term relationships with anyone so I could move on and leave it behind. Patricia's daughters went into foster care and Patricia went to drug rehab. I missed them, but there were other clients coming and other decisions to make.

The “crack epidemic”, which was on the minds of most Americans at the time, was in full swing. In retrospect, the epidemic was largely manufactured by the media, in part due to the racial make-up of its primary users. We saw some crack users at the shelter. More frightening than crack, however, was the effect of PCP, the drug with more white users and less media coverage.

The first time I saw it, I didn’t recognize it. All I knew was that there was a wild-eyed woman standing in the shelter doorway along with her four daughters. They had been at the shelter a week already. Her husband slept in the car with their one son who was over 13 and, therefore, too old to be admitted to the shelter. Tonight the husband walked her to the door, reluctant to leave her side. I let her in despite a clear sense that something wasn’t right.

Carol’s eyes were taking in everything down the shelter hallway, moving with unusual speed from object to person, all around the place. Her daughters refused to leave her side. One of them told me that their dad had given them strict instructions to take care of her. What he thought they could do, I will never know. Against shelter policy, he stood in the doorway trying to get my attention hoping for permission to come in. When I insisted that he leave, he left reluctantly.

In the end, Carol didn’t do much other than stay awake all night and try to maintain intense conversations on random topics. She did not sleep. After lights out, she paced the hallway and smoked continuously. Occasionally she stopped to sit on her bed briefly. Her daughters also refused to sleep. Her most extreme act was to stand on a chair and sing a made-up song about flying. She got down when I asked her to, but she kept swinging chairs above her head while singing other strange lyrics. At one point she tried to lift Julia, another client who was a bit overweight. It almost started a fist fight, but Julia maintained her best judgment, recognized the futility of any response, and left the room to calm down. “That is one messed up white bitch,” Julia told me in the kitchen.

I wrote my report and, of course, got chewed out by Leah the next night. This one, I’ll admit, was understandable. If it had not been for the four daughters, I would never have let her stay. It strained my best

judgment and good will to think about throwing them all into the streets, but I knew I should have done it. When Leah yelled her perennial question at me, "What the hell were you thinking?" the question had an edge of unreality and even stupidity no matter how warranted it was.

We officially banished Carol from the shelter for at least six months and Aaron made me tell her. Her husband stormed around the shelter after I barred her entrance. I never liked calling the police, but this was one time when I did it without hesitation.

Life with Leah continued to be problematic. She would come in smiling and chummy one night and the next time she would be filled with anger over one of my mistakes. She bent policy as she saw fit, then castigated me for not understanding the rules. At first I made the mistaken assumption that she always made the right decision. It wasn't long before she began a relationship with Aaron and he spent his time trying to keep everyone calm and happy. The weekend when Leah thought that her former abuser had found her once again, we all rallied around her and stood ready to call the police if necessary.

One evening they called before I left home for the night shift and ask me to stop at the hospital a pick up an 18-year old on the verge of being discharged. Monica had attempted suicide to get away from her mother and boyfriend. She had spent most of her childhood in serious danger from both of them. This was her "way out." Monica was not talkative, but she came with me willingly and her body language did not exude anger or belligerence. I did her intake and gave her a bed in the singles' room.

Around midnight Monica came to the desk and asked to sit with me for a while. She told me that she was scared and a bit frustrated. "Sometimes my therapist lets me tear newspapers into strips," she told me. "It helps relieve some pressure inside me. And my pressure is up to here." Monica pointed to her throat.

"Well," I told her, "I'll see what I can find. I think we have some newspapers here." I handed her the day's issue of the *Oakland Tribune*, and sat back. She tore them with relish and then together we cleaned up the mess.

"Okay," she told me, "I think I can sleep now." She returned to her cot and I wrote up the episode in the night notes.

I didn't even make it through sleep at home the next morning. Leah called and was enraged with me for letting Monica tear the paper. "Of all the stupid things you've done, that was the stupidest," she hurled at me through the phone. "You aren't a therapist. Who knows what might have happened when Monica unleashed her anger. You wouldn't have been able to handle it if it had gone wrong." I hadn't seen it as therapy, only as a release valve instigated by Monica herself.

I assured Leah that I had learned something, and life at the shelter went back to – not exactly normal, but to the usual routine. Other clients came and went. Some came and went several times. Like any encounter with other people, I loved some, tolerated some, despised others. The aging lesbian with weathered brown skin and looked like a man became a good friend. I met her son and granddaughter (who were not homeless) and we shared cups of coffee at the local women's bookstore. As I learned to get tough with problem clients, she called me "Butch" and we talked long into the night while she was at St. Joe's.

There were some surprises, such as the business executive who came to the shelter in a suit and carrying a briefcase. Unemployed and having lost all savings, she was one of the temporary ones. She spent more time going to job interviews than most of the women and within a month she found one. Then it was only a matter of finding an apartment. She stayed a little longer than most as she got back on her feet. True "success stories" were not often this forthcoming.

Then there was the large black woman who had two daughters and one son. Ebony and Ivory were both as blue-black as she was, while little Jimmy was the palest little blond boy with ice-blue eyes I have ever have seen. He called her "mommy." Melinda's only explanation was, "This is my brother's boy."

I had the painful task of turning away the woman whose only problem was that she had a fourteen-year-old son and no one to care for him. Being over 13, we couldn't admit him to a women's shelter and so she find other options – "other options" likely meaning the streets. Despite all my efforts, I could not find an opening for them that night in any other shelter up and down the East Bay.

I listened to the residents share tips with each other about where to get cheap or free kids' shoes and how to navigate the lines at the AFDC office. I watched while they gave the neediest among them a favorite blouse

or a dollar for coffee later in the day and helped each other get to the bus on time. I watched weekly ethereal mini-communities build and diminish as residents arrived and departed. I also saw how rapidly the delicate bonds of affinity faded when the same people who watched out for each other turned on each other in the heat of the night.

We sang *Mele Kalikimaka* while we decorated a Christmas tree, we doled out the daily bus passes, and we ate our evening goulash and morning *Cheerios* together. The staff worked without pay for several weeks when the funding dried up and the parish had to find more. We rejoiced when our three-month shelter turned into a permanent one. Everyone was constantly exhausted and on the verge of burn-out, while we struggled to maintain our humanity in the face of exceeding odds.

This was truly the hardest job I ever loved. And I would never do it again.

Some stories have a strange way of twisting around and conflating time, creating connections in odd times and places. Doug and I got married and graduate school took us across the country to College Park, Maryland. While in Maryland, we chose to adopt two children, a brother and sister who had spent much of their lives in the foster care system. They were eight and ten at the time.

Reading through my children's social service files was an exercise in *déjà vu*. From home to shelter to foster care and back home again their life story, as laid out in case worker notes, was painful and erratic. When I got to the part where they had lived in a homeless shelter with their mother, I stopped. I had to catch my breath before I could read further. This narrative was straight out of my own past -- but from the other side of the fence. The uncanny part was that it contained an incident right here in Prince Georges County, Maryland that had occurred at the exact time when I was working at the shelter in the Bay Area on the West Coast.

The file noted that the children, along with their mother, had been evicted by the shelter because "this mother does not appear to be capable of controlling her children. Furthermore," the caseworker's handwriting scrawled its way contemptuously across the page, "it appears that this is not the first time it happened. This shelter has refused to let them back in unless this mother agrees to parenting classes."

As I sit in that stifling little cubicle in the blocky, brick, depressing social services building, I look up to see the spring cherry blossoms outside the window. The caseworker pokes her head in to remind me that I don't have much more time. I nod to her and close my eyes. In my mind I see my two children at the tender young ages of two and four. I picture them walking into St. Joseph's Shelter for Homeless Women and Children. I observe while they, along with their mother, walk down the long hallway toward the intake desk, toward me. I listen in on the conversation while I ask their mother the usual intake questions. All the while, her children are cavorting wildly around the desk completely out of control and making a mess of papers, trashcan, and the cups on the counter. With each crash of something else falling, I feel the pain all over again as I try to figure out the best move to make, second-guessing myself. But now it isn't about me and my decision anymore, it is about *my* children and where they will sleep tonight.

I see two smiling, resilient-but-damaged children who have lived through life's chaos and spent time in a homeless shelter. The children are part of me now and not just the offspring of some nameless woman on the other side of the desk. All I can do is hold my breath and wait for the grip to relax its hold on my chest.